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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the findings from a study of characteristics of undergraduates taking student initiated courses at the University of California at Berkeley in the spring of 1968. When compared to students in a control group, the students who chose the student-designed courses were less interested in college as a means of vocational preparation, more oriented toward effecting social change, more aesthetically inclined, and more concerned with interpersonal relationships. They were very dissatisfied with the irrelevance of their academic education. One third of the control group, however, also expressed dissatisfaction with the more traditional courses. The students in the student-initiated courses were characterized by autonomy and independence and were more likely to seek out and create experiences personally relevant to themselves. To encourage initiative, procedures must be established that allow independent students to create their own, personally relevant alternatives. Alternative curricula are also needed to encourage the less autonomous students to seek out new experiences and thereby develop greater initiative. (AF)

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It was found that faculty who favor educational change had significantly more out of class contact with students than those opposed to change.

responsible teachers; they differ mainly in the way they conceive of and carry out their teaching.

Contrary to the popular stereotype and much of the current speculative literature, there appears to be a large reservoir of faculty sentiment favoring some changes in educational practices. It would seem that the main problem for educational reformers is not that of convincing faculty members of the need for change, but rather the problem of mobilizing existing sentiment to make college education more relevant.

Wilson, R. *The Res* aculty response.

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RELEVANT TO WHOM?

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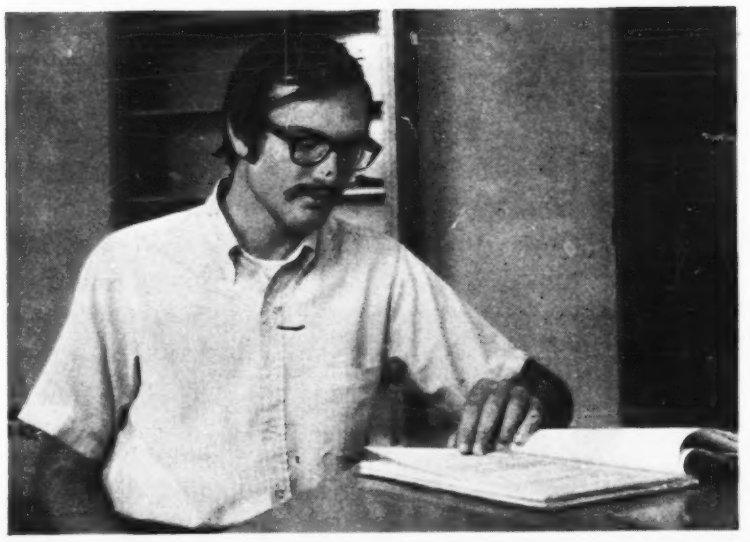
One of the principal problems involved in achieving educational relevance is that experiences which further the goals, interests, needs, and social values of one student may be irrelevant to another. In response to student discontent, some colleges have made provisions for students to select and create courses which they may regard as personally relevant. Findings from a study of the characteristics of undergraduates taking student-initiated courses at the University of California at



JOHN A. BILORUSKY

Berkeley in the spring of 1968 illustrate the significance of student initiative for making higher education more relevant.[1]

These courses are planned and organized by students with a highly variable degree of faculty participation. They are often graded on a pass/no pass basis and most of the class time is spent in small discussion groups. The students are typically required to submit papers based on individual study, and the courses are usually taught by students, members of the community at large, or faculty who donate their time.

Four orientations differentiated the students enrolled in student-initiated courses from a random sample of Berkeley undergraduates. When compared with those in the control group, the students who chose to take the student-designed courses were less interested in college as a means of vocational preparation, more oriented toward effecting social change, more aesthetically inclined, and more concerned with interpersonal relationships. These orientations are inconsistent with the emphases of the regular undergraduate curriculum at Berkeley, which like most traditional college and university courses throughout the country, are concerned with vocational and professional certification and training. It is not surprising then that students valuing personal development or social change feel the need to seek relevance outside the established curriculum.

Predictably, students in student-initiated courses were very dissatisfied with their education. Much more frequently than the students in the control group, they agreed that "University academic programs are unrelated to the central problems of my life" and that "Some of the best students drop out because they do not want to 'play the game' or 'beat the system'." These and other expressions of dissatisfaction on the questionnaire items indicate the irrelevance of most undergraduate courses to the goals, needs, interests, and values of

[1]For an intensive discussion of research methodology and presentation of data, see: Bess, J., & Bilorusky, J. Curriculum hypocrises: studies of student initiated courses. *Universities Quarterly*, 1970, **24**(3), 291-309.

these students. Lest we seek solace in the assertion that these students are atypical, it is important to note that over one-third of the control group also express dissatisfaction with the more traditional courses. That students may be identifying some problem areas is indicated by the fact that two-thirds of the students who were not taking student-initiated courses stated an interest in doing so in the future.

Students in student-initiated courses were most distinctively characterized by autonomy and independence. On an abbreviated version of the Autonomy scale of the Omnibus Personality Inventory, they answered the 15 items in the autonomous direction an average of 89 percent of the time, while the students in the control group did so 76 percent of the time. The autonomy and independence of students in student-initiated courses is manifested in their perception of the personal irrelevance of most undergraduate courses, in their perception of new educational alternatives, and in their attempts to create curricular environments (e.g., student-initiated courses) which are more consistent with their individual needs.

An analysis of courses initiated by students revealed that they, indeed, did seem to be consistent with the personal orientations of the students who selected them. Some courses, such as "Non-Violence and Revolutionary Change," were primarily concerned with social change; other courses such as "Film Production" emphasized aesthetic activities; and some courses such as the non-credit encounter groups, focused on the quality of the student's interpersonal relationships. Moreover, these courses showed little concern with certification (e.g., grades and requirements) and vocational preparation. Indeed, these students said that the subject matter of the courses and their relevance to the students' individual needs and everyday life were the most important reasons for their selection of these courses.

This study suggests the following general hypothesis: autonomous individuals are more likely to seek out and create experiences which are personally relevant. If a primary purpose of education is to help the student develop the initiative necessary to create personally relevant environments throughout his life, students must be provided with the opportunity to initiate and develop curricula. In general, the development and exercise of student initiative require the joint efforts of students and faculty in creating alternative educational environments.[2] First, alternative curricula are needed to encourage the less autonomous students to seek out new experiences and to thereby develop greater initiative. Secondly, it is necessary to provide procedures which allow the more independent students to create their own, personally relevant alternatives.

One of the principal problems involved in achieving educational relevance is that experiences which further the goals, interests, needs and social values of one student may be irrelevant to another.

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Yet few institutions have developed procedures which allow students to create new curricular environments. Furthermore, student-initiated courses at Berkeley have encountered problems of their own. In recent years, it has become difficult for students to obtain academic credit for these courses, largely because of their politically controversial character (e.g., the course for which Eldridge Cleaver gave several lectures). Until the past year, a number of these courses were approved by a special faculty committee, the Board of Educational Development, which was authorized in 1967 to approve experimental courses for credit. However, the power to grant credit was withdrawn from this body, and a proposed committee to replace it has not yet been appointed. Although some courses are approved by individual departments as experimental courses, students must often seek sympathetic faculty who will authorize independent study credit for participation in these courses. These events have undermined the original idea behind this innovation and have reinforced the view that the student can be certified only for learning those ideas which are relevant to the majority of the faculty and the Regents.

Student initiative can be a powerful force in the learning process. However, for this form of innovation to be effective, faculty and administrators must encourage the development of student initiative and allow for its expression in experiences which are personally relevant to students.

[2]For a presentation of recommendations for educational change in general and the development of new models of certification in particular, see: Bilorusky, J. Relevant to whom: The importance of student initiative to curricular development. Paper read at Western Psychological Association, Los Angeles, April 18, 1970.